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## The Topography of the Oedipus Complex

The Documenta Installation: *Crossroad*

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### **Abstract:**

The case is George Hadjimichalis' Documenta 14 installation *Crossroad. The Crossroad Where Oedipus Killed Laius. A Description and History of the Journey from Thebes to Corinth, Delphi, and the Return to Thebes* (1990–95/1997). The approach of the article is location studies from the angle of psychogeography (Coverley), Situationism and geocriticism (Westphal). These theories are applied to the Greek landscapes as rendered in George Hadjimichalis' artistic textualization of the route in his multimedia installation. *Crossroad* has multiple sources. The article casts light on the topographical nature of the Oedipus conflict and its cultural history, including not only the landscape and its route as they exist today, but also as they are figured in Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, and as they are thematized in Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

**Keywords:** Installation, location studies, Oedipus, Documenta, psychogeography, geocriticism

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The myth of Oedipus includes his journey on foot from Thebes to Corinth, Delphi, and the return to Thebes. This journey is the subject of the Greek George Hadjimichalis' Documenta 14 installation *Crossroad. The Crossroad Where Oedipus Killed Laius*. This article takes as its main focus this installation depicting the Greek landscape as a textual representation of the Oedipal myth in the context of two others: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Sigmund Freud's discussion of the Oedipus complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. My theoretical and methodological approach is topography and location studies with the specific angle of psychogeography (Coverley) and geocriticism (Westphal), though my analysis also draws on Situationism, with its subversive use of maps. I consider the geographical place reproduced by the installation as a "guilty landscape" (Reijnders): in this regard, the main illustrative texts, by Sophocles, Freud and Hadjimichalis, are pertinent in combination with the focus on location studies, for *Crossroad* explicitly develops the topographical and cartographical aspects of the Oedipus myth, which are also present in earlier versions of it.

That a work of art exhibited in 2017 is based on a psychoanalytical framing of a classical theme is not self-explanatory. In the article I propose that the relevance of this psychoanalytic theme may be found today in the aesthetics of the installation. These aesthetics are part of the so-called spatial turn within the humanities, as will be demonstrated below, and in the context of Freud's many significant contributions to psychoanalysis and aesthetic theory. The installation may be regarded as an artistic and aesthetic reformulation of the Oedipus Complex, which has gained a new salience in this spatial turn.

## **The Installation**

The full title of George Hadjimichalis' installation is *Crossroad. The Crossroad Where Oedipus Killed Laius. A Description and History of the Journey from Thebes to Corinth, Delphi, and the Return to Thebes*. It was exhibited at Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017 (Fig. 1). More than twenty years old, it dates from 1990–95/1997 and was first exhibited at the Costis Palamas Building, Athens, and again at The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens with *Schiste Odos* instead of the first word *Crossroad* in its title. The main element of the installations is a huge iron table almost filling the exhibition room. This table is covered with nine steel plates with magnesium pigment and synthetic resin. On a narrow shelf along the two longest walls stand sixty-four framed photographic gelatin silver prints, and on one of the other walls hangs a

video monitor showing a silent video tape in loops with a duration of around seven minutes. Beside this monitor there is a small acrylic painting with the title "The Crossroads," which stands out from the other pictures as it does not have the same almost black/white/greyish monochrome colour scheme, although this is not exclusive, as some of the photographs have coloured golden light effects. An essential part of the spectators' signification process of the installation is the caption that anchors it. On the wall in the exhibition room and on the floor under the table there is a sign with information about the artist, the title and years of production of the installation and its materials.

The overall motif of the installation is the landscape with topographic and cartographic aspects. A 3-D landscape in miniature has been modelled on the table with a map of the journey showing the shore of the Corinthian Gulf with the sea varnished, which gives it the hue of sunset. In close-ups, the photographs taken from a low angle show details from this table-top landscape, which the spectator may recognize on the table, and some photographs do not seem to be rendered from the table but show real landscapes. Most of the landscapes depict marshes and mountains with rivers and dirt tracks. The video also contains landscapes, for instance with a flock of grazing sheep.

The anchorage caption contributes to the narrative of the installation, augmenting the artistic Greek landscape with mythic dimensions. It is part of my argument that the installation then connects itself to the real, geographical Greek landscape, which it has rendered mimetically, and this landscape is again connected to the ancient Greek landscape as it may have been in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The general topographical situation of the landscapes with Delphi, Thebes and Corinth poses no problem, but the exact location of the ancient bifurcating road called *Schiste Odos* is only roughly known, though the place name itself is mentioned by Sophocles. George Hadjimichalis commissioned the archaeologist Yannis Pikoulas to locate any archaeological remains or vestiges of the ancient road close to Delphi, but this search for any remains of the ancient road or wheel tracks was inconclusive though Pikoulas was certain of its location in "the narrow passage between the foothills of Mt. Parnassus to the north and Mt. Kirphys (= Xerovouni) to the south. The eastern entrance to this passage has always been the point of convergence of three roads" (Petsopoulos 2001, 137). The relationship between today's landscape and the landscape of the myth is in other words not cartographically clear-cut, but rather mythical.

The *Crossroad* installation has other connections as well, and they are not of a topographical nature, but textual. These include Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* (430 B.C.) and Sigmund Freud's discussion of it in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). There is a further connection to human ontogenesis, to a step in an individual's development, namely the Oedipus complex as Freud interprets it. In the riddle of the sphinx, human ontogenesis in the shape of a walking metaphor has already been included in the Oedipus myth. Influenced by Darwin, Freud suggests that the Oedipus complex is also phylogenetic, an element in the development of the species (Freud 1913/1953, 132, 143, 156).

Under the general heading of location studies, the article will now address the installation in the light of the theoretical concept of intertextual locations, psychogeography and geocriticism, all the time bearing in mind that the location or landscape in question has been mediated by George Hadjimichalis in his installation.



Fig. 1. Part of the exhibition space at Documenta 14, Kassel 2017.

## Intertextual and Guilty Locations

With places such as the Queensboro Bridge in New York, Monument Valley, the Odessa Steps and Mount Rushmore's presidential sculptures as examples, Hansen and Christensen (2015, 259-260) argue that it is impossible to perceive these places as autonomous. To the tourist they will always be regarded in conjunction with Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979), John Ford's westerns, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), and this category of places that have been used as locations in films or media are termed intertextual locations. The formulation of this concept rests on Jean Baudrillard's postmodern phenomenological theory of the implosion of a real place with hyper-reality as he describes it in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). In his travelogue *America* (1986) he banishes "all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it "from the real to the hyper-real order, and to the order of simulation" (12-13), and stresses his point by claiming that "America is a giant hologram," and that America dominates the world by being fictional (29).

The principle of intertextuality is extended from dealing with texts per se, such as novels or films, to places. Umberto Eco (1997, 22) operates with different categories of intertextual quotations, two of which are pertinent in the context of this article. The direct intertextual quotation refers to a specific source or hypotext, e.g. a repetition of a scene at the Odessa Steps in a later film would quote *Battleship Potemkin*, whereas an intertextual effect that consists of a frequent repetition of a topos that is so widespread that it cannot be identified with a specific hypotext, e.g. an underground car park in an episode in a crime series, may be termed a stereotypical intertextual quotation. Both examples are places or locations, and the literal meaning of "topos" from Ancient Greek: τόπος is "place."

It is relevant to an analysis of the location of *Crossroad* that the intertextual references of the installation do not solely concern hypotexts like Sophocles' play; in other words, a direct quotation, or stereotypical quotations of Freudian ontogenesis; but this work of art is a mimetical representation of a place, *Schiste Odos*, so these intertextual quotations are place-bound, and this place is also intertextually bound to hypotexts. *Crossroad* has strengthened the intertextual significance of the place Schiste Odos. Yet, this place already had a significance as what Reijnders (2009) calls a guilty landscape; i.e. a place of murder or patricide. Reijnders' definition of a guilty landscape is that it is active; more active than other landscapes in its perception and it also generates negative associations, as it harbours guilt. Examples given are war zones, sites of former concentration camps or murder scenes. "These guilty landscapes," he writes, "frequently have few



physical indicators that remind us of their past.” In this context, the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ stories does not seem to play such a large role. More than this, the precise liminality between fiction and reality appears to be part of the attraction of these locations." (176)

In 1826, the British artist Hugh William Williams depicted Schiste Odos with a caption describing the place to be "doomed to be polluted with the blood of Laius" (Fig. 2), and in his travelogue of ancient Greece, Cramer describes Schiste Odos as a scene of a crime; i.e. as a guilty landscape:

Advancing towards mount Parnassus, which rises to the northeast of this ancient city, we enter on the celebrated road known by the name Schiste Odos, or divided way, often mentioned by the Greek tragedians as the spot where Laius fell by the hand of his unfortunate son. It was also called Triodos, from the circumstance of the three roads leading to Delphi, Daulis, and Ambryssus uniting there... Pausanias also says it was called Schiste, and reports that the tomb of Laius was to be seen there. (Phoc. 5. Apollod. Bibl. III. 5.) (1928, 159-160)



Fig. 2. "We suddenly came upon the road anciently called Schiste, or the Rent, lying between the lofty mountains of Cirphis and Parnassus, and once doomed to be polluted with the blood of Laius, who was killed there by Oedipus, a principal event in the renowned and tragical story." (Williams 1826)

We now have a complex of hypotexts (Sophocles, Freud, various myths), a real and specific place or landscape (Schiste Odos) and an installation (*Crossroad*). The following section of the article will address the significance of this complex with its character of liminality between fiction and reality against a background of first psychogeography and then geocriticism.

## **Psychogeography and Crossroad**

Psychogeography, explains Coverley tautologically (2010, 10), is "the point at which psychology and geography collide." In 1955, one of the fathers of the psychogeographic movement, Guy-Ernest Debord defined it as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." (1955) The pertinence of psychogeography to *Crossroad* may well be that one of the preferred psychogeographic art forms is the altered map. Debord writes about the beauty of the Parisian metro maps, and "The production of psychogeographic maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions," is a means of insubordination to habitual perception of the urban experience. In the voice-over of Debord's experimental film *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, he states the aim of psychogeography as: "Everyone unthinkingly followed the same paths to their predictable future that they had once learned to follow to their work and home. For them duty had already become a habit, and habit a duty. They did not see the deficiency of their city. They thought the deficiency of their life was natural. We wanted to break out of this conditioning, in quest of another use of the urban landscape, in quest of new passions." (1959)

Hadjimichalis does not only make the spectators of *Crossroad* break out of any conditioning of seeing present-day Greece and its landscapes. Through the artistic rendering of the landscape and the inclusion in it of intertextual enhancements he has also imbued it with "new passions," as Debord demands. We have seen that these passions are not necessarily positive. Schiste Odos is a guilty landscape connected to patricide, blindness and to what Sigmund Freud regarded as a universal human condition; the Oedipus complex. In contrast to the members of the historical psychogeographic movement, Hadjimichalis has left the urban environment, and more importantly, he has employed several layers of intertextuality to produce these "new passions."



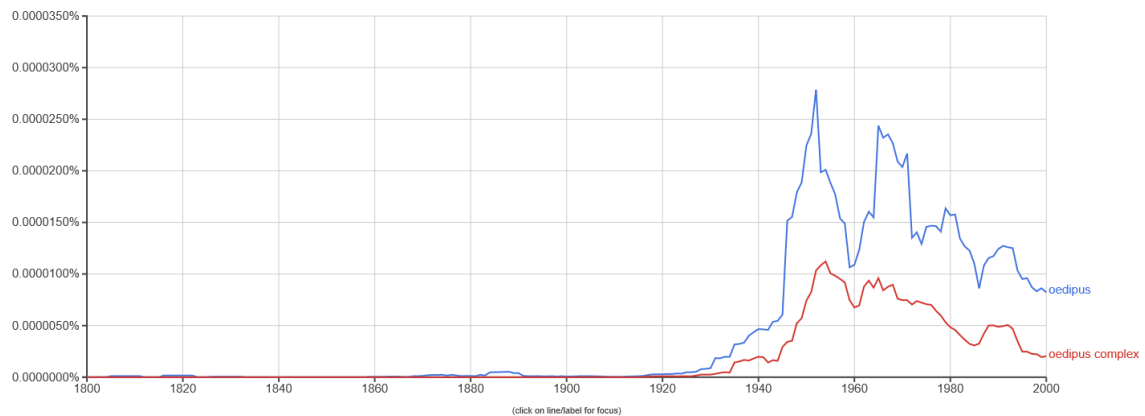


Diagram 1. A Google Ngram Viewer search for "Oedipus" and "Oedipus complex" (Google Ngram Viewer 2018) shows a rise of the use of the word "Oedipus" in Google Books from around 1900. A search for "Oedipus complex" may indicate why. "Oedipus" in conjunction with "complex" shows that the two graphs run parallel. The Greek myth has been promoted by its inclusion in psychoanalytical science and in this way, it has obtained an extended topical position, albeit of a contentious nature. The Documenta installation and its significance belongs to this wider cultural context.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in 1899, Sigmund Freud included an analysis of "the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles' drama that also bears his name" (Freud 1899/1953, 261). Freud's experience of the drama in theatres in Paris and Vienna is documented by Armstrong (1999), and Freud compared the drama to dreams of his patients, retold it and concluded that the dramatic progression of it with its gradual revelation of Oedipus' guilt can be likened to a psycho-analysis. The contentious (Freud 1899/1953, 263, fn. 2) psychological mechanism of the Oedipus complex was then introduced. It is Freud's argument that the fate of Oedipus is not decided by destiny but by a universal human drive in the lives of all children "to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and first murderous wish against our father." (1899/1953, 262). The transhistorical effect of Sophocles' play exists in the fact that it "moves the modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one," and that the fate of Oedipus "might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him."

In the context of art, not only *Oedipus Rex* but also *Crossroad*, it must be noted that Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex was conceived in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The latent content of an Oedipal dream is a repressed wish, and during the dreamwork it takes on a manifest form, which is a private and individual dream narrative. The two works of art, mentioned here, which deal with the Oedipus complex, are structured and have aesthetic narrative forms of general,

and not just private interest. In "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage" (1942 [1905 or 1906]/1953) Freud writes that a condition necessary for transforming individual neuroses into art is that "[t]he repressed impulse is one of those which are similarly repressed in all of us, and the repression of which is part and parcel of the foundations of our personal evolution."

The "new passions" of psychogeography and "the point at which psychology and geography collide" can be found in the combination of *Crossroad* and the general understanding of the mythical Oedipus, as the guilt inherent in the Oedipus complex, which is "repressed in all of us." The guilty landscape of Schiste Odos is also the guilty, mental landscape of the Oedipus complex. The topographically local nature of this place in Hadjimichalis' installation is made universal in conjunction with Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. This universality is strengthened by the cultural status of classical Greek culture, and as Bourdieu expresses it about psychoanalysis: "By setting the new science in the line of descent of Sophocles' tragedy... Freud gave it its academic letters of nobility" (Bourdieu 2007, 16-17). Similarly, Hadjimichalis has added cultural capital, not only to his installation, but also to the present-day Greek landscape Schiste Odos.

## **Geocriticism and Sophocles**

The Documenta installation *Crossroad. The Crossroad Where Oedipus Killed Laius* has a spatial nature. Not only in the way it has been curated in a large room in Kassel, where the exhibition guests are bound to traverse the exhibition space in their contemplation of the installation, but also in the subject and materials of the installation. It is a cartographic piece of art. Geocriticism can address this spatiality.

The spatial turn within the humanities is reformulated in geocriticism as a requirement for interdisciplinary approaches with the aim of understanding the fictionality of real places, so that the legibility of places becomes the aim (Westphal 2007/2011, 6). Transgression, which has its etymological roots in Latin "transgredi" – to step across, to pass, is a function of reading places. The perception of a place moves between the real place and its fictional qualities, and it may move diachronically between the present of the real place and its historical or mythical enhancements. In other words, the geocritical understanding of a place is liminal, with shifting demarcations between conceptual place and factual place. The same liminal, narrative mechanism functions in fictional representation of real places, for example in films or novels – or in an artistic installation such as *Crossroad*.

We have seen that the Oedipus myth has found representations in drama, psychoanalysis and art, including art that stresses the space of the myth, as in *Crossroad. The Crossroad Where Oedipus Killed Laius* or, as in the plays, where the place of the bifurcating road is crucial to Oedipus's realisation of his guilt--a guilt that in psychoanalysis is repressed, but is nevertheless a function of human development. This guilty place and space in its different forms may be understood in terms of Henri Lefebvre's spatial categories. He discusses the relationship between three spatial categories: lived space, conceived space and representational space. Lived space is connected to a representation of space through signs. Lefebvre mentions artistic creation and culture as some of the agents of this representation (1991, 62, 125-126, 300-301), and he asks about mental space, or imaginary space, "Is this perhaps the space of speech? Both imaginary and real, it is forever insinuating itself 'in between.'" He highlights the liminal and transcendent character of this space: "a place imaginary and real – and hence 'surreal', yet concrete. And yes, conceptual also." (251) Westphal continues this reasoning: "In Greece, the bard was the storyteller of the world, the midwife of the worlds, so poetic work functioned to represent the *oikoumene* [the whole inhabited world] and that which exceeded the *oikoumene*, which only the flight of the imagination could achieve" (2007/2011, 77).

This liminality is crucial to understanding *Crossroad*. Westphal establishes a hierarchy between texts and places. First, a text may influence the view of a place; a place may itself become text; and finally "a genuine intertwining of text and place" (152). Thus texts (such as those of Sophocles and Freud) have influenced the perception of Schiste Odos: Hadjimichalis has textualized the place in the shape of his installation, and the installation has intertwined these texts and the actual place. This 'intertwining' of text and place is manifest in Schiste Odos. This is an example of a real place, represented by a text or artwork in a transgressive way. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* echoing down through cultural history, has added fictionality to this bifurcating road. A few examples of the textual representation of the place will suffice.

In John Dryden's *Oedipus* from 1679, an adaptation of Sophocles' play, it is not until Oedipus is told that Laius' murder took place "Where three Ways meet" (1679/1717, 421) that the truth is revealed to him. This revelation takes the form of delayed exposition during a long conversation between King Oedipus and Iocasta at the end of which neither Oedipus nor the audience is in any doubt about the patricide. This key conversation quickly turns into a kind of criminal interrogation, as Oedipus seeks to connect the Oracle's prophecy of his own fate and

Tiresias's accusations made by Tiresias. This interrogation and its tragic outcome, that Oedipus is guilty of patricide and incest, are set off by the detective fiction's classical trope, the scene of the crime, i.e. the (in)famous crossroads, a guilty landscape.

Likewise, in Seneca's *Oedipus*, (ca. 1st century AD/1917) the "three-forked road" is significant, revealing Oedipus' fate. Creon's description of this landscape, through which Laius travelled, is both scenic and cartographic:

Seeking holy Castalia's leafy groves, he trod a  
way hedged in by close-pressing thickets, where the  
road, three-forking, branches out upon the plains.  
One road cuts through Phocis, the land that Bacchus  
loves, whence lofty Parnassus, leaving the lowlands, by  
a gentle slope lifts heavenward his two peaks; but one  
leads off to the land of Sisyphus bathed by two seas;  
a third into the Olenian fields, through a low valley  
winding, reaches the vagrant waters and crosses the  
cool shallows of Elis' stream.

(1917/c. 1<sup>st</sup> century AD/1917, 451)

These scenic and cartographic aspects with the routes of the three roads are poetically enhanced by myth. The ancient landscape of Phocis is connected to the god Bacchus and the mountain Parnassus, which was sacred to this god and his mysteries. "The land of Sisyphus" was Ephrya, now Corinth. Olenia and the ancient district Elis were named after Olenus, a son of Zeus.

The geographical information of this scene is correct; but the main point is that it is not only a guilty landscape, it is also a conglomerate of mythological allusions. Seneca's depiction of this place can be categorized, as described above, by Lefebvre as mental space, or imaginary space that is both real (geographically) and imaginary (mythologically).

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Schiste Odos is mentioned five separate times with the central passage, quoted here, that reveals Oedipus' Aristotelian anagnorisis:

Ye threefold roads and thickets half concealed,  
The hedge, the narrow pass where three ways meet,  
Which at my hands did drink my father's blood,  
Remember ye what deeds I did in you;  
What, hither come, I did?—the marriage rites  
That gave me birth, and then, commingling all,  
In horrible confusion, showed in one  
A father, brother, son, all kindreds mixed,  
Mother, and wife, and daughter, hateful names,

All foulest deeds that men have ever done.  
But, since, where deeds are evil, speech is wrong,  
With utmost speed, by all the Gods, or hide,  
Or take my life, or cast me in the sea,  
Where nevermore your eyes may look on me.  
Come, scorn ye not to touch my misery,  
But hearken; fear ye not; no soul but I  
Can bear the burden of my countless ills.  
(1909–14/c. 430 B.C., lines 1444-1460)

Based on a real place, these seventeen lines encapsulate the place itself, Greek and later European cultural history and an important psychoanalytical concept. In Hadjimichalis' installation, the landscape of Schiste Odos exemplifies "a genuine intertwining of text and place." A semantic or semiotic approach may clarify this process of intertwining. Westphal employs Even-Zohar's term "realeme" (2007/2011, 95-96): A referent, such as the real place Schiste Odos is in a variable and transportable context, which reflects the composite nature of the world, so that Schiste Odos exists in a heterocosm, in which the border between reality and fiction tends to disappear. The terminology of liminality will explain this position. It is not *limes*, which means a border that can be closed, but rather *limen*, a threshold that can be crossed, which is in play. The landscape around the mythical Schiste Odos is real and can be observed from a bus today, and it is also transtemporal and belongs to Ancient and mythical Greece, or in other words, it is both homotopic with a known referent in a real world and heterotopic as the referent is augmented by myth, drama, psychoanalysis and art.

## **Conclusion: Crossroad and Spatial Theories**

The article has described and analysed the place of origin of the Freudian Oedipus complex, and how this place, Schiste Odos, has emerged and re-emerged through cultural history, most recently in the Documenta installation. This installation connects topography with an unavoidable intertextual reading of it. The guilty connotations embedded in this bifurcating road has lent it power to become a topos both in the original sense of a real place and in the sense a motif travelling from text to text through the centuries.

The article has employed the two theoretical and methodological approaches of psychogeography and geocriticism. Psychogeography as an artistic movement arose in the late 1950s out of the Situationist International, which was a radical politically subversive movement

with the aim of overthrowing Western bourgeois society. One of the means was to create situations, which changed the perceptions of geographical locations (Coverley 2010, 92-97). In this sense the installation *Crossroad* has contributed to the meaning of Schiste Odos, and as demonstrated in the article the installation with its topographical theme is an intertextual project with strong echoes of the Oedipus complex.

The installation *Crossroad* rests on cartography in combination with the Freudian Oedipus complex and other versions of the Oedipus myth. Geocriticism is a theoretical approach to analyses of places and their significance. It advocates an interdisciplinary approach to decode the meanings of conceived space and representational space, and it points out that this perception of space is often transgressive and liminal. The liminality of *Crossroad* and its use of places, both real and represented in cultural texts, can be understood in the light of how Freud described artistic *poiesis* in e.g. "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage." The Greek landscape, mimetically depicted in the Documenta installation, is also a demonstration of how an individual neurosis caused by the Oedipus complex is turned into art, so that the installation hovers on the border between classical Freudian psychoanalysis, a real place and this place as a topos in cultural history from Sophocles, 430 B.C. to Hadjimichalis' Documenta 14 installation in 2017.



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